



State of Connecticut  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Commission on Children



**Senator Harp, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations Committee,**

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children.

I am here this morning to oppose Section 90 of HB 6354, *An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations Concerning General Government* which speaks to the elimination of the Commission on Aging and the bundling of five nonpartisan legislative Commissions into a citizens advocacy entity. Each of these commissions represents a particular and significant demographic for our state, at minimal cost.

Children are not a special interest citizens' group. They are the next generation. In truth, they are the only investment in our state that just keeps on growing. Their growth is Connecticut's growth. Thousands of these children and youth need an entity representing them, but they cannot vote and have no voice.

The General Assembly created the Commission on Children through Section 46a-126 of the General Statutes with bipartisan support. We are mandated to advance public policies in the best interest of children. In our work, we 1) develop landmark policies for children, 2) bring dollars and donated skills to the state, 3) lead in public information for children and youth, 4) perform key research on children's needs, 5) bring the family to government and government to the family, and 6) are recognized as the best coordinating entity for children in the nation.

We believe there are more fiscal gains and good child outcomes if we are kept intact rather than consolidated as the Governor proposed. I would like to share a few specifics of the functions the Commission on Children perform for the state:

**Entrepreneurs for Children and Families**

Our agency brings in significant dollars to the state for children and their families. Over the last two years, we brought in \$1,513,200 in external dollars to support community programs and policies for children and youth. The Commission's total agency budget for these same two years totaled \$1,032,635.

For every dollar you invest in our budget, we bring in \$1.47. That is a rare investment in these times. The Governor shows a savings of \$700,000 in year one and \$800,000 in year two by consolidation of the commissions. We bring in more than those savings, without consolidation.

Examples in the least two years:

- Literacy- In partnership with Literacy How, we brought in \$880,000 from the Grossman Family Fund to test new reading assessment tools for teachers that would offer more data as well as immediate intervention strategies. These funds also paid for classroom coaching, teacher training in assessment and intervention in reading and parent classes on how to partner with schools on literacy. The findings from these efforts were noted by the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus as significant to the achievement gap in our state. They became components of the reading policy response, embedded in the Governor's Education Reform bill in 2012.
- Results First- We worked with OPM and Appropriations to research, write and receive a grant from the MacArthur and Pew Foundations to work on return-on- investment analysis of corrections and juvenile justice policies and programs for youth and young adults. This work is modeled after the state of Washington, where they have a successful model of return-on-investment analysis utilized by their Governor and Legislature, across party affiliation, to determine investments for children, youth and young adults. We won this grant, valued at \$100,000 in technical assistance and state convenings. Of most importance, this work, when completed, promises to save the state significant dollars by investing in what works and disinvesting in what shows no gain.
- Jobs-We partnered with Liberty Bank Foundation to test the viability of a fund, entitled the WorkPath Fund, so that families could find work or sustain an existing job. The resources garnered to make this Fund were \$60,000. The fund, aligned with the Legislature's employment goals, will likely bring in \$100,000 to \$300,000 this year and significantly more than that in blocking job loss.

### **Model policy design**

We staff the Legislature on policies that have been the first of their kind or model laws for the states.

### **Reading as Policy Example**

As mentioned above, the Commission researched, worked with national scholars and drafted comprehensive literacy language with the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus that became the center of the Governor's reading policy in the Education Reform of 2012.

This included a new assessment instrument, teacher training, coaches, and state requirements for a professional development plan, particular reading intervention requirements to disallow disproportionate referrals of children of color to special education, and intensive intervention with individualized reading plans for every student k-3, who was not reading at proficiency so that he or she would succeed in school.

This work has been so successful it is being replicated through philanthropy in all of Norwalk, Naugatuck, as an entire district, is using their Alliance grant money to continue this initial work in all of their elementary schools. East Haven is also using the model throughout their district.

The State Department of Education has begun implementing this model in five school districts. This begins to address the alarming fact that 75% of the Black and Hispanic students are not reading at goal. The Casey Foundation, carefully following the literacy work in each state, gave us the National Pacesetter Award in Reading resulting from this particular work. The Education Commission on the States wrote up this work as one of the best state innovations.

### **Home Visitation as Policy Example**

Another example is home visitation. Our agency wrote the grant that won our state opportunity to work with other states to integrate early care and education and home visitation. This grant was offered by Zero to Three, in partnership with the National Conference of State Legislatures. Home visitation offers infant toddler programming to the most vulnerable families such as families with severe poverty, violence, and mental health challenges. This work has led to an understanding that we have no system of services in home visitation and that home visitation is not integrated with our early childhood system. We have written draft language for a system which is now embedded in a child and youth mental health bill this session.

As you can see, these examples of substantive model policy work, not citizen advocacy.

### **Innovators**

We innovate new practice where large gaps exist. When it was clear that families were not part of government and government did not reach families, we designed the first family civics initiative for parents in the country, called the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI). This initiative gives parents the tools and confidence to be voices for children in their schools, communities and state. It is in 23 CT towns and cities and has been replicated in 12 other states. Over the past decade,

- PLTI graduates have generated \$1.1 million in volunteer time.
- PLTI was recognized by Congress as one of the top ten innovative practices in all the states and was honored by the Eagleton Institute, the Ford Foundation and *Good Housekeeping Magazine*.
- The Kellogg Foundation has given us funds for national replication, which in turn gives partial administrative dollars to our state to help our work here.
- The Institute of Medicine at the National Academy of Science just called on us to advise the state's medical researchers on how to bring in parents to reduce child

obesity. This offers us a network and critical research partners. It was due to our state's model work on parent leadership.

PLTI is a Connecticut invention, respected nationally. If you merge our commissions, this work will be lost.

### **Disaster and Children**

The Commission on Children worked in Newtown from the early morning after the shooting until the town had created its infrastructure for support and healing. We built, with our national partner Save the Children, a play and art station in John Reed Middle School. The play station was a partnership between community mental health, family strengthening and disaster management. It became the transition room where some children lingered before seeing a counselor. Others stayed while their parents sought crisis help. Games were invented. Group discussion emerged on death, mourning, how to recover.

After a few weeks of intensive dedication, Save the Children moved on and the Commission on Children created a partnership with IPPI and Danbury Children First to continue the play station. Over 400 children and their parents were supported.

Our agency immediately created a website to help children and the community talk with children about this unthinkable disaster. The information was shared through public and private partners with thousands of families statewide. We have also begun work in towns helping communities talk about these issues. We designed and led the community conversation in Middletown with parents, elected leaders and community agency directors. We have designed a civic platform for youth in partnership with Newtown Healing Arts Center, the state departments of DECD and SDE so that all students can offer tribute and share their thoughts on school safety. This work will be documented in a compendium, and will become a travelling children's museum exhibit.

After Storm Sandy, the Commission worked with towns and shelters to assure all children were safe, protected and properly fed. We helped design systems to deliver cribs, infant formula and family supports. This work was performed in concert with our state's Child Emergency Preparedness Committee, a committee the Commission established with all three branches of government and the community, after 9/11 and the aftermath of Katrina revealed that children are forgotten in large disasters.

The Commission wrote the first state legislation in the nation to assure protections for children in times of natural or unnatural disaster. It was the Commission on Children's work on children and terrorism that led to Congress' national entity on Children and Disaster in Washington, DC.

### Scholars on best research and practices

The Commission studies policy questions that might assist in good child outcomes. For example we analyzed:

- The impact of preschool on school readiness utilizing the kindergarten teacher as the key informant. This study informed us that two years of preschool offered significant child gains that one year did not in literacy and numeracy.
- How long children were waiting in foster care for adoption. These findings propelled our states comprehensive adoption bill.
- The impact of racial integration in the early years on children's notion of difference and attitudes towards race. This study was performed with Yale University and the Commission on Children..

### A bridge between the community, family and the state

The Commission speaks for children. We galvanize resources, constituents and unexpected stakeholders to ensure children thrive. We average 350 calls per week from local citizens and parents, 800 hits on our website per week and 30 requests per week from state and local policy leaders.

We distribute more than 180 products per day to the public on children's development. This ranges from products for every new parent in hospitals, in both English and Spanish, to shirts with immunization schedules, to booklets on the importance of reading to children. Our products are also used in other states due to their clarity, access and art designs.

Statewide, we partner with mayors on children's issues, reach youth and parents, work with grandparents, help the librarians, and work with the police.

### Partners with you, as well as Congress and national experts

We staff the Legislature on policies that have been the first of their kind or model laws for the states. These include School Readiness, the Parent Trust Act, The Children and Homeland Security Act, the State Investment in Prevention Act, An Act Concerning Children in the Recession, the Child Poverty Reduction Law, and the Act Concerning Strengthening of Bullying Laws.

We work extensively with our Congressional delegation on early brain research, school readiness, early reading, hunger, homeland security and children, family policy, home visitation and federal fund maximization.

The Executive Director has just finished her term as Staff Chair for the National Conference of State Legislatures's Committee on Human Services and Welfare. In this role, she has had opportunity to access and study best practices in all fifty states, which she consistently brought home to Connecticut.

### **Staffing**

We made a commitment to build this agency so that you had the most exceptional staff for your child planning and child policy needs. Our small staff includes a former chief of staff of the Washington DC delegation, the former head of the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic, a former news reporter from a reputable daily newspaper, and a former planning director in the executive branch. We have two bi-lingual staff members to reach growing populations in our state. I myself was chief of staff for family policy for the state of California under Speaker Willie Brown, staff to the human services committee on child care, poverty reduction and all of human services. Previous to that served as staff to Congresswoman Bella Abzug.

These combined staff skills lead to strong research, outstanding products, consumer design that truly reaches the public across educational level, high acumen in public policy, strategic sense and an understanding of each branch of government and the community.

We are proud of building this for you and are at your service.

### **Consolidation?**

Sometimes it is easier to wipe out a small agency in its entirety than to delve into larger agencies to look for efficiency or to explore revenue generation. Often however, those small agencies are the most efficient operations around. At times like this we are an easy target, though an odd target, as we are less than 1/3 of 1% of the total budget.

Unlike most agencies, our agency was cut 51% over the last few budget cycles. Unanticipated further holdbacks for agency retirees' costs cut us more. What was \$1.1 million in FY09 is \$517,783 in this current fiscal year, FY13. All staff is furloughed ½ day or one full day per week. Most contribute free work hours, focused on goals for children. We are working at 5.2 FTE. We once had 9 staff positions, now we have 7.

In spite of these cuts, we have continued to lead on child policy, national networks and funds for our state. We do not support the consolidation as it offers no savings and will erode our capacity to bring in dollars to the state, as we do now. This is not the time to cut or consolidate the agency that, for less than 65 cents per child per year, promotes their health, safety, and learning.

## **The Elephant in the Room**

To combine the Commissions and end the Commission on Aging misses strong demographic trends, the impact of the gender gap, the strong need to study cost savings for the growing cohort of seniors and the marvel of such small entities performing such large tasks with successful civic and policy gains.

We practice dexterity, are not slowed by the rolls of bureaucracy and move fast and nimbly for you and the constituencies we represent. To meld us into a single agency will undo our impact, offer less savings than our one agency brings in in one year, and will halt the fiscal, civic and policy impact of these small entities.

Since there are no true savings, and each of these constituencies is a power group in demographic trends, and the cost is less than 1% of the state budget, one has to wonder whether this is a cosmetic effort to show agency consolidations. Why tinker with tea cups when there are whole rooms in the state house to be considered?

## **No Support for RB6616**

The Commission would also like to speak against RB6616. This bill ends our state's model policy to shift budget from crisis to prevention with proven prevention practices that help child and youth outcomes. As we move forward using results based accountability and seek to replicate Results First to assure return on investment in budget planning, this bill seems short-sighted, misses the necessity to attend to best prevention practice in our budget and throws away a model strategy silhouetted by both the Pew Foundation and the National Conference of State Legislatures as a best practice among all the states.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.